DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 158 763 IR 006 365

AUTHOR Ellis, Richard
TITLE Interrelationship of Libraries and Resource Sharing.
PUB DATE Mar 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Library Systems Conference (Albany, New York, March 1-3, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Conference Reports; Financial Support; *Libraries; *Library Cooperation; *Library Networks; Regional Libraries; Shared Services
IDENTIFIERS New York

ABSTRACT

Library Financial Problems can be traced to world problems such as inflation and the emergence of a highly educated welfare state. While the demand for information is increasing, library materials are becoming more costly to acquire, store, and retrieve, and services are limited by the unavailability of materials resulting from restrictions on acquisition budgets. Cooperative service networks are inevitable, especially in specialized subject areas such as medicine and chemistry, or in economically deprived geographic locations. Ccoperative library systems are similar to other public service systems in that mutual confidence among member organizations, flexibility to accommodate variations in local procedures, and the necessity for employees of the system to do their jobs, are essential to the success of the system. New York State's NYSILL and 3-R systems are important pilot experiences in library networking and may be an example for national library cooperation. The public, if accurately informed, will be supportive in efforts to resolve the problems of library service. (Author/JAB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED158763

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

INTERRELATIONSHIP OF LIBRARIES AND RESOURCE SHARING

by

Richard Ellis

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

E. J. Josey

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

IR006366

INTERRELATIONSHIP OF LIBRARIES AND RESOURCE SHARING

by

Richard Ellis

I. The Forces That Are Acting Upon Us

I've been asked to comment on a set of related topics: library cooperation and resource sharing, local systems and national networks, technological developments and their significance, and economic factors, among others. The occasion involves preparation for the forthcoming second New York State Governor's Conference on Libraries, and for the White House Conference that is to follow in 1979. I trust that this schedule does not mean that we must wait until 1980 or later before some relief is obtained to deal with the present national crisis in funds for library services. The situation is urgent, and demands stopgap assistance to cover the immediate future. No other issue presently before the library community exceeds the immediacy and significance of this one; it must take first priority. We cannot build workable higher-level systems on a base of ailing, resource-starved institutions.

I am a sociologist, and I cannot separate the internal troubles of libraries from the larger context of forces in the world at large. It seems to me that most of the serious problems that libraries now face can be traced to these larger forces. These include general rivalries and jealousies among localities and regions; the increasing significance of international, as well as national, constraints on what we are able to accomplish, as in the world-wide inflation of costs; and the emergence of the highly educated welfare state as a general model for the global society. Forces such as these entail profound changes, and the strains are showing everywhere. Libraries are in a particularly difficult position. The unprecedented growth of the educational system has vastly increased the ranks of both the consumers and the producers of information. At the same time, traditional economic systems appear to be increasingly incapable of absorbing these crops of educated people. Our economy is falling short of its productive potential, with severe effects on tax revenues; as this is happening, we also find that prices are rising precipitously. These problems are generating terrible strains on the division of public funds. Enormous sums must be spent to care for the sick, the disadvantaged, the poor, the unemployed, and the aged. Other sectors of the system continue to fight for their traditional shares of the pie. Our ability to make rational choices among all of these alternatives is not very advanced, and in the scramble for tax dollars, libraries have become expendable. They do not constitute a large interest group in themselves, and the benefits of their services are subtle and difficult to measure by the crude, short-term yardsticks of benefit-cost analysis that are presently in use. Thus at the very

time that demand for information is increasing and that library material is becoming more difficult and costly to acquire, store, and retrieve, librarians find themselves with a dwindling share of resources to use in carrying out their work.

II. The Decay of Service Capabilities

The results of these trends are ominous. The ability of librarians to respond to the needs of their patrons is being rapidly eroded. It is already well known that a number of major American libraries have had to severely restrict their basic services to patrons. Less well perceived is a crippling shortage of money to acquire and maintain collections. The effects of this shortage may be seen in recent statistics for New York's NYSILL interlibrary loan program. In 1970 the combined holdings of NYSILL's member libraries covered 85 percent of the requests directed to the system. At present NYSILL libraries hold about 69 percent of the items its users wish to obtain. Thus simple unavailability of materials, brought about in large measure by severe restrictions on acquisition budgets, may now be the primary obstacle faced by NYSILL in attempting to fill its patrons' needs. The point may have been reached where further improvements in the network's internal efficiency--its skill in screening requests and directing them to the right resource--will not be able to compensate for the general lack of holdings. Some patrons may already face less than even odds of success in using the system, and this could be a potent incentive to go elsewhere for service. If such problems affect NYSILL, which is arguably the strongest research

purpose interloan network in the world, what must the situation be like in less fortunately endowed areas? It is possible to envision a future in which these trends, coupled with continuing shortages of money, lead to the substitution of fee-for-service systems in which information is available only to those who can afford to pay the full costs of location and retrieval. I would view such a development with alarm. Human knowledge and literature should not be treated as a commodity, to be offered only to privileged people.

III. The Rise of Mutual Assistance Networks

Cooperative service networks are an inevitable response to pressures such as these. NYSILL and its supporting structure, the 3-R's library systems in New York State, are outstanding examples of such networks; similar structures are to be found in other state library systems and in a wide variety of special-purpose information networks serving groups as diverse as chemists, special educators, and others. Such networks permit separate libraries to share the burdens of maintaining adequate collections, exchanging materials so that individual users can retain access to all potential services. These types of arrangements can be found at all levels. In New York, the 3-R's systems provide a mechanism for library cooperation and resource sharing at the level of counties or groups of counties. The NYSILL network is an example of sharing at the level of larger regions and states. National networks exist in some selected fields, notably in medicine, and it seems probable that future national planning for library service will be built around the concept

of a master national networking plan for comprehensive coverage of information and literature needs throughout the country.

All such systems share many common characteristics. Each tends to take the form of a membership association. Groups of these associations may band together in turn to form higher-level aggregations; New York State contains many examples of such arrangements. A fully-developed statewide network may include a great variety of arrangements, with very complex systems in place in the most populous localities, relatively simple configurations in others. New York is one of a small number of states that have developed really comprehensive systems of this kind.

These types of systems are also found in other public service sectors. For example, I have recently been involved in the review of a set of regional resource centers, located throughout the United States, that are designed to assist the national Head Start program in securing materials, advice, expertise, and technical assistance in its work with handicapped children. These centers--they are called RAPs--are not libraries, but they bear a remarkable resemblence to cooperative library systems. They must carefully assess the strengths and weaknesses of each agency with whom they are involved. A great deal of their work involves the coordination of resource sharing arrangements. They are called upon by their membership to serve as an occasional channel for dealings with higher authorities, and they serve as switching centers to handle the more demanding problems of their members, matters which local Head Start grantees or service providers may be unable to treat without higher-level help.

There are additional similarities between the RAPs and library systems like 3-R's. Both seem to thrive on a kind of entrepreneurial leadership--that is, an aggressive interest in carrying out the desires of the clientele. Both kinds of organizations devote large portions of their time to similar activities: coordinating joint ventures of their members through meetings and conferences, and handling specific requests for service, often referring these to third parties. In both cases the principal visible outcome consists of filled transactions.

I have drawn attention to this comparison because it is useful to understand that cooperative library service systems are not wholly unique entities. They respond to many rules of good practice for public service systems generally. The 3-R's systems in particular are especially good illustrations of the importance of three programming principles of basic importance. First and foremost there is a need for mutual confidence among all of the parties to the association. If divisions of labor are unfair, if benefits are not equitably distributed, then these networks do not do well. This collective confidence is not easily achieved. Typically many separate parties, motives, and interests must be satisfied. Considerable patience and forebearance in the startup years seems to be indicated; the passage of time seems to result in genuine improvements in problems that may seem insurmountable at the outset.

A second fundamental requirement for all public service networks is sufficient flexibility to accomodate variation in local circumstances. Some federal programs--notably nutritional projects for children--have

achieved notorious reputations for irrational rigidity in the face of extreme variation in local conditions. The better service networks tend to exhibit a willingness to experiment and to tailor their arrangements to the specific patterns of need that exist in each locality that is served. Further, the administrators of the better library service networks do not insist on immediate conformance to the same service levels for all, a "least common denominator" tactic that may be a step backward for some and overly taxing for others. World-wide experience with social programs of all kinds shows that such authoritarian strategies simply do not work. A far more constructive approach is to obtain an accurate appraisal of where each member unit stands, and then to draw on the experience of the more successful operations in order to improve the weakest ones. None of this is easy. It not only requires a great deal of hard work; it also seems to demand considerable administrative and political skill. The 3-R's systems include impressive examples of this kind of program flexibility and responsiveness to the special needs of particular members or localities.

A final basic programming principle is simply that people in these systems must actually do their jobs. Although this has not been a major issue in any library system that I know about, it can be a very serious matter indeed in many other settings. Our public programs, library programs included, are insufficiently inspected, evaluated, audited, and policed. They are therefore easy prey for unprincipled people. The problem is especially severe in federal circles, where it is commonplace to encounter projects where people never show up for work, to learn that

invoices and time sheets have been falsified, and so on. No one gathers statistics on ~~such~~ these matters, but it is my strong impression that library programs are relatively free of such problems. Certainly, in over ten years of association with the library community in this state, I have never encountered anything remotely approaching the degree of sloppiness and outright fraud one finds in Washington. Why should this be so? It may be tracable to the strong association of libraries with a tradition of intellectual rigor, which should help to encourage sound judgment and to discourage dishonesty and wishful thinking. These traits are fundamental to good planning and administration; in comparison, questions of the extent of funding are trivial. All the money in the world cannot much enhance the capacities of those who expect to prosper at the expense of their colleagues, or who lack reasoning skills, or who are out of touch with the world in general. Indeed, I am convinced that money is seriously overemphasized in the planning of many public service systems, for experience in the evaluation of a wide variety of operations consistently shows that low-overhead, low-salary operations may be every bit as effective as the expensive ones. Both 3-R's and NYSILL are excellent examples; both are very low in cost as most such systems go. Money is simply not the controlling factor in system performance; rather the critical matters may be solid mutual interest and trust among the parties, flexibility, and diligence, as noted above. The kind of money being discussed here refers to administrative funds, of course; these remarks do not apply to the need for funds to support the basic services which libraries are intended to provide.

IV. Some Immediate Challenges

It will be apparent from the foregoing that I view cooperative library systems as a wholly necessary, perhaps inevitable, development, and that I view New York State's systems with particular approval. To be sure, there may be many imperfections in the 3R's systems. But it is normal in any program of this kind for some units to be better off than others; development does not proceed in even, tidy steps. On the whole, library programs supported by this state seem to be very good bargains for the public. I do not make such judgments casually, by the way; I make my living evaluating public programs and for this reason I am obligated to support my views with evidence. In any event, my views are quite orthodox. New York State is well known for leadership in the provision of library services.

That leadership is needed now. Despite the strengths of the state, the funding crisis has hit New York very hard. The two lead examples of troubled libraries provided in the recent premier issue of Library News, the fact sheet on library problems published by the Urban Libraries Council, were the Research Libraries of the NYPL and the Buffalo and Erie County Library. NYPL's troubles were well known to me; those at BECL came as something of a shock. Other libraries in the state have serious problems. New York also faces severe general difficulties, such as the shortage of funds for collection building and maintenance mentioned above.

As I noted above, these very basic and serious problems of maintaining nuts-and-bolts library service seem to me to constitute the most important issue now faced by libraries in the state. Without additional money, these difficulties will get worse. We cannot expect that the production of information will slow down, or that the number and variety of users will be reduced. There remains a hope in some quarters that technology may provide a quick fix, curing these ailments through some application of computers, microstorage, and telecommunications. I am skeptical. There are many cost-effective applications of modern information-processing technologies in libraries, but I know of no available system that can replace physical distribution of printed paper, nor have I heard of machinery that is capable of interpreting a user's reference problem. In general I do not feel that the problems of libraries are essentially technological in their nature. They seem rooted more in matters of the economy, in systems of government that determine the allocation of tax funds, and in the expectations for service that are fostered by the culture. Technical developments will continue to provide good and useful tools for librarians to use, and to some extent they may supplant some traditional functions of the acquisitions and cataloging specialists. I would expect, however, an increasing demand for librarians equipped to serve as professional guides to literatures.

The major concern, then, must be to remedy present deficiencies in basic service. I would expect, both as one who has resided in the state and as a consultant who has experience with the library community here,

that the forthcoming Governor's Conference would be an appropriate place to review the present status of library service in New York, giving particular attention to existing shortfalls and deficiencies in service. An objective, sober review needs to be presented, summarizing the specific penalties in service that are being experienced, and identifying the cost of bringing services back into line. Complications of local library funding being what they are, I would not necessarily expect that the state would make a flat commitment in the direction of universal cost sharing. But it might very well explore the possibilities of grants-in-aid or other approaches to financial help.

Beyond this pressing issue, there is the question of further development of 3-R's and NYSILL. Here much may depend on the outcomes of the 1979 White House Conference, which is likely to focus on the form and extent of national library networking. New York State's programs are important pilot experiences for the nation in this regard. In turn, there are possibilities of advantages to the state if federal systems are created. Again, it will be crucial to be well prepared. An intimate knowledge of the ways of Washington will help, for federal programs run the gamut from operations that are admirably well organized and managed--RAP, mentioned earlier, is one such--to those that can only be characterized as disasters. Much will depend on the specific mechanisms adopted in legislation or in program regulations for the administration of the federal effort. If the best models are used--for example, those typical of some programs within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare--then the federal presence could be very beneficial for libraries.

I would conclude with a note on the idea of public participation in the resolution of these matters, a requirement for both the Governor's Conferences on Libraries to be held this year and the White House Conference scheduled later. One senses that for many years libraries have been somewhat uneasy about taking their case to the public. Perhaps there is a subliminal fear that nonusers would arise en masse and vote the libraries into a permanent state of destitution. Such fears may have been valid in the past. Now, however, I think they should be laid to rest. Americans, and particularly New Yorkers, do not want second rate library service. I believe that when the citizenry is accurately and honestly informed of the present problems of library service, we will find it supportive. The case is there to be made; the machinery is now in place for a serious consideration of these issues. The time for lamentation is at an end; the time for purposeful action is at hand.

Notes on Author

Richard Ellis, a sociologist and social science analyst, has directed numerous library and information systems studies for Nelson Associates. For several years he was Director of Library Systems for Nelson Associates and designed and conducted research and statistical studies for Checchi Corporation and Nelson Associates. His numerous library and information systems studies for Nelson Associates include several planning, evaluation

and research projects for the NYSILL interlibrary loan system. In addition, he designed and conducted many Nelson surveys of library users in Metropolitan Dade County, Florida; Lucas County, (Toledo), Ohio and New York City Patrons of the Research Libraries of the New York Public Library. Other studies under his direction include cost analysis of interloan transactions, and national surveys of automation experts on behalf of the Library of Congress. He is currently on the staff of a Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm.